

Victims Gain Unexpected Therapeutic Rewards from Skilled Investigative Interviews

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Researchers are beginning to realize that there's an unexpected benefit when investigators conduct skillful interviews of officers who have survived shootings and other life-threatening encounters.

In addition to eliciting more and better information, good questioning techniques tend to ease the emotional after-burn many officers experience in the wake of traumatic events and leave survivors with enhanced feelings of well-being, according to two behavioral scientists considered leading authorities on police interviewing.

In an article published in the "International Journal of Law and Psychiatry," psychology professors Dr. Ronald Fisher of Florida International University and Dr. Edward Geiselman of UCLA describe how civilian crime victims and witnesses can experience significant therapeutic results when questioned by investigators who understand the true workings of human memory.

Likewise, a similar approach in taking statements from law enforcement officers who have been involved in major force events can promote officers' psychological health and aid in their emotional recovery, while soliciting a maximum amount of investigative information, Geiselman said.

Among other things, interviews that follow scientifically based guidelines can, as a welcome side benefit, potentially

"reduce officers' anxiety levels, help restore their sense of control, improve their assessment of their performance in explaining their actions and promote a general sense of self worth and well being," said Geiselman, a faculty member of the Force Science Institute's week-long certification course in Force Science Analysis.

He and Fisher are the pioneers of cognitive interviewing, a method of mining the memories of cooperative subjects that has proven far more effective than the traditional police-questioning approach.

In interviewing officer-involved-shooting survivors, as well as crime victims and cooperative witnesses, investigators too often embrace the questioning style commonly used to interrogate criminal suspects, Geiselman said. As the journal article explains, this involves the interviewer doing most of the talking (in the form of asking questions); favoring very specific, short-answer inquiries; discouraging the interviewee from providing information unrelated to the narrow questions; often adhering to a pre-determined written checklist of questions; and frequently interrupting to ask follow-up questions.

This is an unsalutary and dysfunctional strategy for questioning cooperative non-suspects that actually reduces the amount of information gathered and increases >>